



Lost for Words:

Poor literacy, the hidden issue in child poverty

A policy position paper

Emily McCoy, Literacy Hubs Programme Manager

National Literacy Trust

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About the National Literacy Trust

We are the only national charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy. We run projects in the poorest communities, campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians and parents, and support schools.

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Introduction and context

Literacy levels in England have largely stagnated since 2007. Key Stage 2 (KS2) English results show a fluctuation of no more than 1% in standards between 2008 and 2011. In 2012, the proportion of children who achieve Level 4 at KS2 increased by 4 percentage points¹ although changes in assessment make it hard to compare these gains to earlier figures. The gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers remains, and the numbers of adults with the lowest level of literacy are increasing². At the same time there is a general consensus that literacy is a fundamental skill; a cornerstone for social mobility by virtue of its role as a foundation for educational attainment and access to employment. Yet national policy to address low literacy has remained unchanged with its focus situated within formal educational institutions. The advent of the Primary and Secondary National Strategies, under the last government, created a step change in literacy attainment³ but, in the main, improvement has reached a plateau. To achieve the next stage of large-scale improvement a radical change in thinking about literacy policy is needed.

One in six people in the UK struggle with literacy. This means their literacy is below the level expected of an 11-year-old. This figure has remained unchanged since 2003. (Skills for Life Survey, 2011)

The number of adults reading at the lowest level (Entry level 1) has increased from 3.4% to 5% of the population since 2003. (ibid.)

At Key Stage 2 (age 11) the percentage of young people achieving the expected levels for reading increased by 8 percentage points over 10 years, from 78% in 1999 to 86% in 2009. In 2010, there was a drop of 3 percentage points. Overall levels remained roughly the same in 2011 at 84% but increased to 87% in 2012.

Literacy is more than an educational skill. By addressing low literacy in national policy, this country has the potential to more fully engage with the causes of inter-generational cycles of poverty and to ameliorate the impact of poverty on people's lives. Low levels of literacy and living in poverty create a mutually reinforcing cycle that is difficult to break. People with low levels of literacy are more likely to earn less and experience poverty⁴. Moreover, their opportunities are limited in other important aspects of life, including education, employment and access to services. The cycle continues in subsequent generations, with their children having an increased propensity to leave school without achieving any qualifications.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/167380/sfr33-2012v2.pdf.pdf. However, since the nature of English assessment changed in 2012, figures aren't strictly comparable.

² Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011, *Skills for Life Survey*

³ Annual government figures demonstrated a trend of improvement from 1997 to 2007.

⁴ Clarke and Dugdale, 2008, *Literacy Changes Lives*, National Literacy Trust

The National Literacy Trust believes that the Government's concern should not just be the experience of poverty, but its impact over the life course, such as future employability. Early intervention is the most effective way to improve outcomes and minimise impact, both socially and economically. Children are more at risk of experiencing poverty than any other age group.⁵ Around one in five children live in poverty, and this is expected to increase to around one in four within the next 10 years.⁶ Improving literacy is one way to break the poverty cycle.

It is with this in mind that the National Literacy Trust calls for literacy to become a priority for those developing national policies that address child poverty.

Literacy can assist in combating child poverty

Despite huge investment in tackling child poverty under the Labour Government⁷ child poverty rates continue to rise in large part due to the economic climate and job cuts, cuts to services which support families and changes to the benefit system⁸. Under current government policies, child poverty is projected to increase from 2012/13 with an expected 600,000 more children living in poverty by 2015/16⁹. This upward trend is expected to continue with 4.7 million children estimated to be living in poverty by 2020.

In this context, the Government has put forward a case to think of innovative ways to address child poverty in the United Kingdom.¹⁰ However, policymakers have yet to grasp the potential impact of literacy in policies on this subject. Although there is substantial research showing that experiencing poverty in childhood can have a negative impact on literacy, little has been said about how improving literacy rates can conversely reduce poverty and the impact of poverty. Low literacy needs to be addressed by policymakers in order to give people the chance to break an inter-generational cycle of poverty and isolation. Literacy skills are the foundation stone for success in educational attainment, employability, community participation, individual confidence and well-being.¹¹

⁵ Brewer et al, 2011, *Child and Working-Age Poverty from 2010 to 2020*, IFS Commentary C121

⁶ Wood et al, 2012, *Poverty in perspective*, Demos.

⁷ Estimated around approximately £18 billion annually on benefits and tax credits and excluding programmes such as Sure Start and the National Minimum Wage, see, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2013, *Labour's Record on Poverty and Inequality*

⁸ There has been a wide range of analysis on the statistics around Child Poverty and the reasons for its increase. For a useful analysis see

⁹ Browne, Hood and Joyce, 2013, *Child and Working Age Poverty*, Institute of Fiscal Studies

¹⁰ See, *Measuring Child Poverty: A consultation on better measures of child poverty*

¹¹ Clarke and Dugdale, 2008, *Literacy Changes Lives*, National Literacy Trust.

The National Literacy Trust believes that any national policy relating to child poverty should consider the role of literacy in reducing the impact of poverty. The following three areas are explored in this paper:

- 1. Household income**
- 2. Experience of poverty**
- 3. Breaking inter-generational cycles**

Combined, these three strands provide a powerful and compelling approach to combating poverty and its effects in the immediate and longer term. We believe this approach needs attention from policymakers so that its benefits to the country can be properly analysed.

1. Household income

Parental skill level has a significant impact on household income level. A low level of literacy can negatively affect access to employment and maintain worklessness. A 2011 CBI /EDI survey of 566 employers shows 42% are not satisfied with the basic use of English by school and college leavers. Of employers who rate the competency of their low-skilled staff as poor or satisfactory, over half report problems with literacy. Low literacy can also keep parents and carers in the most temporary and unskilled roles. Men and women with poor literacy are least likely to be in full-time employment at the age of 30. Poor literacy skills can also be a serious barrier to progressing once in employment: 63% of men and 75% of women with very low literacy skills have never received a promotion¹².

The financial impact of low literacy is therefore relevant for children living in poverty in working and in workless households. Furthermore, a low level of literacy is a key determinant of the length of time for which a family will live in poverty.¹³

The Government's Pupil Premium initiative has been welcomed as a means of addressing the attainment gap between children from low-income households and their peers. However, household income can have a significant impact on childhood development well before the age of entitlement. The Millennium Cohort Study found that by age five, children from low-income households were over a year behind in vocabulary compared with children from high-income households.¹⁴ Other research has demonstrated that the literacy gap emerges before school; one study found that by the age of three, children from the most prosperous households have heard 30 million more words than children from impoverished households.¹⁵

¹² Clarke and Dugdale, 2008, *Literacy Changes Lives*, National Literacy Trust

¹³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2010. *Literacy: Poverty and Development*.

¹⁴ Hansen and Joshi 2007, Millennium Cohort Study Third Survey: A User's Guide to Initial Findings.

¹⁵ Hart and Risley, 2003. The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap. *American Educator*, 27.

High-quality childcare can help mitigate these factors. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) report found that disadvantaged children particularly benefit from good quality pre-school education that reduces the effects of poverty for these children which can otherwise show at school-entry¹⁶. Evidence from areas such as Stoke shows how a concerted effort to improve the accessibility of quality early language provision for very young children can have a dramatic impact on rates of language delay.¹⁷

The National Literacy Trust welcomes this Government's continued focus on Communication, Language and Literacy and calls for the Pupil Premium to be extended to cover three- and four-year-old children so that a greater number of children can start school with the early language skills they need. Calculations from Barnardo's indicate that such an initiative would be cost-neutral to the Government, and yet will have a significant effect on the literacy outcomes of children living in poverty.¹⁸

2. Experience of poverty: Ameliorating the impact of living in poverty

A previous literature review undertaken by the National Literacy Trust demonstrated that parental involvement in their child's reading has been found to be the most important determinant of language and emergent literacy¹⁹. However, the realities of living in poverty mean that the resources that facilitate a learning environment in the home are less readily available.

Increased access to materials such as books can reduce the effects of living in poverty for children.²⁰ Children's literacy levels are strongly influenced by the number of books they are exposed to in the home, irrespective of household income or parental education.²¹ Studies also confirm that increased access to books is related to reading achievement and longer engagement in the education system.²²

One way to ameliorate the impact of poverty through literacy could be to increase access to literacy services. Norfolk County Council has worked with local

¹⁶ Sylva et al, 2004, *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education*, Institute of Education

¹⁷ See Stoke Speaks Out for more information at www.stokespeaksout.org.uk

¹⁸ Evans et al, 2012, *Mind the Gap: Ensuring all disadvantaged children benefit from the pupil premium*. Barnardo's.

¹⁹ Bonci, A, 2011, *A Research Review: the importance of families and the home environment*

²⁰ Krashen et al. 2010. An analysis of the PIRLS (2006) data: Can the school library reduce the effect of poverty on reading achievement? *CSLA (California School Library Association) Journal*, 34 (1).

²¹ Schubert and Becker 2010. Social inequality of reading literacy: A longitudinal analysis with cross-sectional data of PIRLS 2001 and PISA 2000 utilizing the pair wise matching procedure. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 29:109-133.

²² Evans et al 2010 Family scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 Nations. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 28: 171-197.

businesses to set up a number of pop-up libraries around the community.²³ As well as increasing library membership numbers, this initiative removes some of the perceived barriers in visiting traditional libraries and increases access to learning materials, particularly for those who would otherwise not engage with library resources. The National Literacy Trust is working with Middlesbrough Council to increase access to literacy resources and local support through work with partners including Erimus Housing (with 10,000 households in Middlesbrough), Middlesbrough Football Club, Arriva North East and NHS Teesside²⁴. Pop-up libraries have also been adopted in the United States as a means to improve literacy rates for children living in poverty, and thereby reducing the attainment gap between children in high-income and low-income households. This initiative is supported by research that shows that children in low-income households fail to develop reading skills outside of term time, while children from affluent households continue to improve.²⁵

The National Literacy Trust calls for more literacy resources to be made available in deprived localities. We suggest that pop-up literacy shops are formed in deprived areas, including high street locations and other community venues in order to promote easy access to books and to other local literacy support including online literacy support.

3. Breaking inter-generational cycles of poverty: Future education and employability

Literacy lays the foundation for a future of greater individual resilience and increased social mobility. Through literacy development, people can better engage both socially and economically with their communities. Improvements in literacy skills are associated with increased likelihood in voting and increases in membership of local clubs and societies²⁶. Qualitative evidence from adults improving their literacy skills adds a richer picture of what it means to no longer feel excluded from wider society, to feel empowered to make positive change in their own lives and to be better able to support any children in the home. From this perspective, it is not literacy on its own that makes a difference, but what it enables people to do in order to ameliorate the experience of living in poverty and therefore increase the likelihood of breaking the poverty cycle.

Early intervention means that children are more likely to succeed in school and attain the necessary qualifications to become productive and engaged members of society. Evidence suggests that the one promotive factor consistently associated with a

²³ See for instance, [/www.norfolk.gov.uk/News/NCC116550](http://www.norfolk.gov.uk/News/NCC116550).

²⁴ See www.literacytrust.org.uk

²⁵ See for instance, The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, <http://gradelevelreading.net/uncategorized/museums-libraries-win-2-5-million-for-grade-level-reading>.

²⁶ Clarke, C, 2010, *Literacy Changes Lives*

range of positive outcomes for children is the mother's higher levels of educational qualifications, specifically level 4 (diplomas) and above for cognitive skills and KS1 attainment, and level 5 (degrees) for behavioural outcomes²⁷. Conversely less highly educated parents tend to have children with poorer cognitive, academic and behavioural outcomes²⁸. Research shows that the earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects.²⁹ It is now accepted that the link between disadvantage and achievement is cumulative: when poorer children enter primary school, despite early indications of potential, they tend to fall behind.³⁰ Consequently, the chances of breaking cycles of poverty and deprivation are considerably reduced as children get older.

The earlier we can support parents and carers to address their own literacy skills and better support those of their young children the more effectively we can act to break inter-generational cycles of low skills and poverty.

The National Literacy Trust calls for all local Child Poverty strategies to acknowledge the importance of literacy and take account of the need to engage parents and carers in home literacy activities. Specifically we recommend that all areas develop a local campaign to:

- **Help promote involvement of parents and carers in early language and literacy development and increase their confidence to do so**
- **Increase the frequency of parents and carers supporting literacy at home**
- **Increase awareness of, and signpost parents and carers to, local provision and resources**

Conclusion

The financial climate means that, as never before, policymakers need to think with greater dexterity about how to face the ongoing social challenge of child poverty. We hope that this paper has given a new perspective on both literacy and child poverty and some practical ideas for policymakers and commissioners at a local and national level.

The National Literacy Trust would like to make clear that we do not seek to undermine arguments that it is household income which is the determinate of child

²⁷ Jones, E. et al, 2013, *Family Stressors and Children's Outcomes*

²⁸ Covered by a range of research but most notably papers by Flouri, Tzavidis, and Kallis, 2010 and by Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2010

²⁹ Mullis et al, 2004, *Early literacy outcomes and parent involvement*

³⁰ Feinstein L., 2004. *Mobility in Pupils' Cognitive Attainment during School Life*

poverty. However, in this paper we believe we have identified how literacy has a part to play in the area of income as well as the potential for literacy to reduce the impact of poverty in the short term and the inter-generational implications of poverty in the longer term.

We are keen to meet with individuals or organisations working in policymaking to discuss this paper and welcome comments or feedback.

Finally we would like to acknowledge the input of the members of the National Literacy Forum whose discussions informed the writing of this paper. Members include:

- Arts Council England
- Barnardo's
- Beanstalk (formerly Volunteer Reading Help)
- Booktrust
- Booker Prize Foundation
- Campaign for Learning
- Capacity
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education
- Cllr Alex Bigham
- Community Foundations Network
- Education Endowment Foundation
- I CAN
- Middlesbrough Council
- Naomi Eisenstadt CB
- Pearson
- Pre-school Learning Alliance
- Save the Children
- Teach First
- The Prince's Trust
- The Reading Agency
- UK Literacy Association

Forthcoming paper: The importance of localised approaches

In preparation for the forthcoming general election and in response to the recent spending review, the National Literacy Trust is examining future literacy policy in the United Kingdom. This is the first of four papers to be published by the end of 2014 reviewing the literacy issues that policy should address and making recommendations for change.

Levels of low literacy are highest in areas of deprivation. Particularly in times of economic instability low literacy makes individuals and communities more vulnerable to inequality, increases the risk of exclusion and undermines social mobility.

The National Literacy Trust is exploring the impact of area-based approaches to combating low literacy through its Literacy Hubs programme. The first Hub is located in Middlesbrough with two further Hubs planned for late 2013. The next policy paper will address how a localised model offers a flexible mechanism to tackle low literacy and to effectively address the crucial issue of Home Learning Environments.